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ABSTRACT

Couples counseling is about both saving and optimally ending relationships. Some of the factors affecting the counselor's role in couples therapy are addressed in this paper. It opens with a listing of the objectives of counseling, such as the need to remain neutral. Some of the societal influences on divorce rate are discussed, along with suggestions for helping clients reframe their conception of divorce. Such reframing may include looking at how divorce runs in families, whether it is selfish to question relationships in midlife, the reality of single-parent and second families, ex-spouses, and blended families. Four process steps to improved divorce management are offered. The acceptance of divorce, it is claimed, does not mean people have lost faith in love or long-term relationships. It looks at reasons why women are less likely to remarry following divorce, shifting attitudes toward divorce, the trend to defer divorce, hostile environments that produce cautiousness. Also covered are issues of legislating long-term relationships, those situations in which couples "stay together for the kids," and some of the advantages of serial monogamy. A list of divorce-related facts is included. (RJM)

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When Couples Divorce: Issues for Counselors

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Couples counseling is about both saving and optimally ending relationships. The therapists's role is sometimes that of divorce facilitator. While clients of marriage counselors often assume the therapist's role is always to work as hard as possible to preserve the marriage, many therapists define their role in far more neutral terms (Levengood et al., 1996; Winter et al., 1995).

Objectives of Counseling

While they acknowledge that they are frequently enlisted to salvage a failing relationship, marital therapists often believe they are being called upon to facilitate a peaceful separation, lay the groundwork for amicable joint custody arrangements, or provide support for a spouse who is about to be abandoned. In a survey of therapists' attitudes, all of these roles were seen as legitimate for a marital counselor. This means that it is often incorrect for clients to assume that the therapist is always on the side of the couple remaining together.

In studies comparing the attitudes expressed by therapists affiliated with Catholic charities, and those functioning in secular settings, consumers expected more pro-marriage attitudes from the nonsecular therapists (Levengood et al., 1996; Winter et al., 1995). The therapists in the Catholic organizations were found to be no more likely to define their task as preserving the marriage. Many counselors in fact felt that since many of their clients were burdened by immense guilt about the prospect of a divorce the church would frown upon, it was important for them to counterbalance this by leaning over backwards to compensate for these negative attitudes by arguing for the advantages of divorce as a viable option in many cases.

Therapists are trained to remain neutral in such matters, but the Levengood et al. (1996) and Winter et al. (1995) results suggest that therapists make use of statements that many would see as quite persuasive (e.g., What will it be like in the future to not be able to share in grandparenting with your spouse? Looking back in years to come, what will it feel like to have stayed in this marriage for the rest of your life if nothing changes?) Not all therapists feel obligated to balance their

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presentation of these type of statements. The divorce experience of the therapist proved to be an influential factor in shaping their choice of interventions in one study. Those who had divorced expressed more pro-divorce sentiments.

Societal Influences on Divorce Rates

Relationships between men and women have been dramatically transformed by social and economic forces. Technology altered the relationship between sexuality and reproduction, and that between sex and economic potential. Changing sex roles ushered in a new potential for equality. With dramatically increased freedom and potential control came the challenges of greater personal responsibility.

More permissive attitudes toward divorce have affected most people. Some have been directly influenced by the resultant end of their own or a parent's marriage. Others have been affected more indirectly; they assimilated the option of divorce as part of the spectrum of likely possibilities. Marriage no longer necessarily means forever.

One of our recent studies failed to find expected differences in intimate relationships between adult children of divorced parents, and those from intact marriages. But interestingly, what we did find was that most of the young adult women sampled, independent of their parents' marriage experience, had difficulty trusting men, and voiced serious concerns that their intimate relationships wouldn't last. Observing divorce second hand...in friends, colleagues, and even on television, apparently can negatively affect our expectations.

"Divorciphobia" is not unique to those who have experienced divorce consequences directly. Planning for the possibility of divorce has become routine, despite the romance-dampening effects of prenuptial agreements and the like.

Helping Clients Reframe Divorce

Couples who decide to divorce often seek counseling to help members of the family to make an easier transition. Negative emotions typically predominate, and the counselor is expected to assist in fashioning a way of thinking about the decision to divorce that permits hope.

Divorce Runs in Families

Although critics of divorce often turn to statistics on the high rate of divorce among children whose own parents divorced to find evidence of the lasting harmful effects of divorce on the children of divorce, the same information can be used constructively to think more positively about the option of divorce.

The critics argue that the multi-generational legacy of busted marriages could be an indication that permitting divorce

has corrosive effects on children's developing potential for long term commitment, which may have negative consequences for society in more broad terms as well. However, others argue that families that have experienced divorce understand it to be a painful, but workable solution to unhappy relationships. Such families may erect fewer painful barriers to divorce when it is appropriate. These families enable couples to end unfulfilling relationships, and free them to find greater relationship success elsewhere.

Still others believe the family link may be the product of shared genes rather than shared family environment. They speculate that certain characteristics that predispose to divorce may be inherited (e.g., Impulsivity, Risk-taking, thrill-seeking, tendencies to explosive anger, low levels of empathy, etc.).

So many successful individuals portrayed in the media have divorced. Our idols make divorce seem a glamorous trapping of the lifestyles of the rich and famous. Divorce an blended families are interesting and intriguing.

Is it selfish to question relationships midlife?

Robert Bly implies that in even asking about whether or not our marriages are working well enough, we are manifesting our stubborn refusal to grow up. Is the selfish, narcissistic, postponed, "me" generation enjoying a prolonged adolescence, irresponsibly neglecting the needs of their children?

The agony accompanying most parents' deliberations before divorcing argues against this characterization. Divorce is wrenching, conflictual, agonizing...time and again those who divorce describe it as worse than having someone close die.

What legacy should parents give their children? An example of competence, confidence, responsibility, calm, and satisfaction...punctuated by moments of bliss, here and there? If a candid assessment of one's relationship makes this more possible, is such an evaluation really all that selfish? Finding love that works may provide an important example for children to follow. The best legacy of all, perhaps.

Single-parent and Second Families

The divorced family is an entirely new family form; today's families are defining these new relationships with few examples to follow. The evolving patterns demonstrate children's resilience and the caring devotion of most parents, even those embittered by the painful loss of a marriage.

Many single parents feel stressed to the breaking point, as they cope with falling income an rising responsibilities. Yet some research we've done challenges the notion that this parental stress translates into detrimental parenting practices. In a recent observational study, single parents were actually found to respond more warmly to their children after school. The visiting parent is still new; few role models exist. These relationships are often burdened by anxiety on both sides.

Children and parents voice concerns about future plans: will work force a rescheduling next week? Will plans for a sleepover keep us apart? Negotiating the part-time parent relationship requires superb organizational, planning, and communication skills, maturity, and steadfast commitment.

The economic burdens of divorce impose a lasting hardship for some children. While two-thirds enter college, only half graduate. Many drop out because of the inability to pay their own tuition. Fathers, especially those who remarry and must support children from a new relationship, are unwilling to continue support after children reach eighteen. Yet as college and post-graduate training become the norm, ending support at eighteen places many children of divorced parents at a disadvantage that will color their whole adult lives.

Ex-spouses

Divorce does not end the connection and obligations of marriage, especially when there are children. Decades after divorcing, many people remain very preoccupied with their former spouse. This is often true after a successful remarriage.

Coming to terms with the cause of the break-up becomes a life-long challenge for many. Since the actual causes are unknowable, endless speculation, blaming of self and of other, can drag on for years. While one might expect those partners treated most fairly in the settlement process to harbor the least resentment (at least this seems to be what many initiators agreeing to generous settlements assume will happen...they will purchase the good graces of their ex), this is often not the case. Often those treated most generously rationalize this as proof of the other party's greater guilt, and display greater anger as a result of their sense of innocent victimization.

Predicting a spouse's response to divorce is extremely difficult. Some formerly dependent, passive spouses flourish with the challenge to assume greater responsibility. Other formerly independent confident spouses fall apart in self-doubt and self-blame. Since the custodial parent's level of psychological adjustment seems intimately tied to the successful adaptation of the children, finding ways to ease the custodial parent's transition is often a priority for most therapists.
In Laws ex-wives are much more likely to stay in touch. learning how to grandparent after divorce is a new challenge.

Blended families

The special challenges of helping children in blended families revolve around their often heightened needs for attention and reassurance, sibling rivalry and favoritism issues,

negative attention seeking, and their need to handle the disparate rules and standards frequently associated with multiple households.

Relationships among step children are frequently very positive. many children in blended families are positive and resilient, and are understandably proud of their many, varied relationships. Children can learn lessons about enduring concern following divorce, or lessons about unkept promises. The commitment of the parents to their children's welfare largely determines the quality of the child's post-divorce experience. Petty, combative, hostile, competitive parents can poison children's relationships with their noncustodial parent. Parents with solid psychological resources and social support can learn to keep their disappointment from tarnishing their child's admiration of their parent.

Four Process Steps to Improved Divorce Management

1--empathize, don't personalize children's attacks (e.g., it's a good sign if they feel safe enough to let their negative side show to you)

2--temporize, don't catastrophize (e.g., the crisis period doesn't last, as children learn they can still rely on you)

3--stay creative, flexible, and solution-focused (e.g., maybe the parents can move back and forth, rather than the children; build on strengths by attending to occasions where the ex-spouses cooperate effectively, rather than the minority of the time when they operate destructively)

4--separate the marital and parental roles

The Acceptance of Divorce: Sanctioned Serial Monogamy

The Second Time Around

The high rate of divorce does not mean people have lost faith in love or long-term relationships. The majority of people who divorce eventually remarry (75% women and 80% of the men). However, most of those who remarry are younger, and this is especially true for women. Of those who remarry after divorce, 48% do so in their 20s, 33% in their 30s, 11% in their 40s, and only 3% in their 50s.

However, many second marriages fail. Often they are burdened by pressures connected with the first failed marriage. Ex-spouses' ongoing demands for support, demands of children from the earlier relationship, and the difficulty associated with finding sufficient time to nurture the second marriage all

complicate the lives of those that try again. Those who succeed often do so by making a very conscious effort not to repeat the mistakes of their past.

Many seek counseling to assist them in negotiating the challenges of blended families. Many struggle valiantly to prevent their anger from damaging their children. Some are able to maintain caring relationships with ex-spouses, but this is rare. Many say that successfully coparenting after divorce demands more patience and cooperation than before. When there are children, the demands of having a good divorce are often greater than the demands of having a bad marriage.

The same mistakes tend to get repeated in second marriages, unless partners make a conscious effort to change. The new relationship seems great at the beginning, but once the luster of lust subsides, the old habits recur and the old disappointments resurface.

Why are women are less likely to remarry following divorce?

Several factors contribute to why women are statistically less likely to remarry following divorce. First, women encounter fewer prospects to choose from, in part because most men don't initiate divorce until they've formed a new relationship. Therefore, fewer men are unattached for any length of time following divorce.

In addition, society still values youth more in women, which leads many eligible men to prefer younger, often never-married, women. Older women are often unable or unwilling to offer men new children and a replacement family, whereas a young spouse may be able to do this.

There are several indications that other issues come into play in explaining why so many remain single following divorce. Older women are more particular and less needy than younger women and men, because many have effectively developed a very independent lifestyle. Many are less likely to be seeking a replacement parent for their young children, because they feel that as attentive mothers they are capable of satisfying their children's needs for nurturance. Fathers generally feel far less equipped to fulfill all parenting obligations when they are given primary custody. This leads many divorced men to seek a wife who can assist them with child care.

Divorced women seem to be more likely to succeed in developing alternative forms of support and connection through children, friends and work. Women seem more able to establish a psychologically comfortable home and social life without a man than men.

Shifting Attitudes Toward Divorce

Our society has maintained that the rights of the individual are as important as the rights of the group, and has made divorce a more viable option for individuals dissatisfied with their legally sanctioned union. Unfortunately, however, the needs and

desires of adults and children are often in conflict with regard to the decision to divorce. Furthermore, the decision to divorce is often unilateral, and usually disadvantages some family members while benefitting the initiator.

Ambivalent messages about marriage abound. We voice pro-family and strong pro-marriage attitudes. All adults are expected to marry, yet many perceive negative connotations to the words "wife" (subservient, dependent, someone who lives through her spouse) and "husband" (a good catch, burdened by a "ball & chain", trapped, whipped). We dream of fulfilling marriages, but don't expect the passion to last. Television caricatures of married couples often portray people at their worst: bitter, biting, snide, feeling superior to others.

Previously, people felt trapped in bad marriages. Marriage was often an economic necessity for women. Divorcing hurt a man's career. Dominant community and religious values made divorce taboo.

Shifting attitudes made divorce an acceptable option for many adults. Rather than remain in "loveless" marriages, people were often encouraged by friends and therapists to carefully evaluate their desires, and to respond assertively to the need to initiate changes.

Although for a period the divorce rate seemed to be steadily climbing, it appears to have plateaued. A variety of forces have converged to prompt many to delay their leaving a problem marriage.

The Trend to Defer Divorce

Real incomes for many have been shrinking in recent years. Economic pressures have made it increasingly difficult for many middle class individuals to divorce. Many middle class couples can no longer afford to divorce, because of their dependence on two incomes to sustain a middle class lifestyle. More divorcing couples continue to share a household today, because of the unaffordability of establishing two households. The stagnant real estate market in several areas has made it difficult for couples to use the profit from a home sale to soften the economic blow of divorce. Many couples languish in frustrating, loveless relationships because they feel trapped by economic circumstances.

Some politicians are capitalizing on this trend... providing a moral rationalization and transforming this economic necessity into a virtue. Keeping families together is hailed as the new civic responsibility. There is talk of changing no-fault divorce laws when couples have children, to discourage the practice.

The fears connected with promiscuity have made monogamy look good again. HIV is offered as one fitting form of punishment for spouses who stray.

We are seeing new-styled interpretations of the same old research. Negative effects on children are being played up; the many resilient, well-nurtured children of single parents are

ignored. Divorce has highly variable effects on children; simple generalizations are extremely hard to justify. Yet many present an oversimplified picture of the devastation of divorce. The ambiguity of the findings makes it possible for those with a bias to present "facts" that favor their particular view.

Hostile Environments Produce Cautiousness

Some believe that the world used to seem safer and more controllable. The threats of Communism and the Soviet Union were distant and in many ways stably predictable. Random acts of terrorist groups, corporate downsizing, drive by shootings, and canceled insurance policies seem to more immediately touch the lives of Americans today.

Today's workplace is perceived as increasingly uncertain, providing a reduced sense of belonging. Suburban bedroom communities with beautifully appointed homes, housing neighbors that haven't met, create a growing sense of isolation. Increasing public support for a hard-nosed, cold governmental stance refusing all but minimal help for the needy, can make the world seem quite a frightening, heartless place. In this context, leaving the one other adult who has a legal obligation to look after your welfare seems a lunacy.

Perhaps it almost always seemed so. Marriage was always intended to be a haven in a harsh world. The 60s and 70s may have been a rare aberration. During this rare time, prosperity permitted a greater sense of personal control and security. Going it alone after divorce perhaps seemed a bit less daunting when your job and healthcare insurance were more certain. When the world is portrayed as less predictable and more dangerous, people are reluctant to take risks of all types.

Aging Makes Marriage Attractive

Older individuals who divorce are less likely to remarry. Marriage provides an internal buffer against the anxieties of aging, of being old and alone, and of facing the inevitabilities of death.It also provides external supports to cope with the increasing disabilities and infirmities of old age.

Staying Together for the Kids

This is not as altruistic as it may sound. With greater coparenting now the norm, both parents know the agony of day-to-day separations. In today's modal dual earner families, the children matter most to both parents, so neither finds it possible to leave, no matter how disagreeable the marriage.

Legislating Long-term Relationships

Nostalgic voices from the right are now loudly arguing for a return to a time when divorce was hard to obtain. State

legislatures are reviewing proposals that would modify several current no-fault divorce statutes, in order to curtail parents from divorcing as readily. Some see those who divorce and chase a new love as being infantile; it is far more mature to accept (perhaps with resignation) the imperfect nature of human love. Others imagine a future where serial monogamy is the norm, as Margaret Mead predicted.

The Advantages of Serial Monogamy

As life unfolds, we change and need different things from our relationships. In our 20s, many feel the need to prove to self and others that we are capable, effective, independent adults. In our 30s, many decide to tackle the parent role, and nurturing others becomes the priority. In middle age, many turn attention more inwardly, and recognize frustrations and unmet needs. Secure in their maturity, some risk exposing the childlike needs they stifled earlier, and find it easier to ask for comfort and holding. Often it is only with older age that we feel comfortable asking our spouses to baby us. Relationships that enable us to perform the tasks of one life stage may fail us later on. Margaret Mead predicted greater serial monogamy, as society evolved.

Serial monogamy refers to a succession of committed, sexual monogamous relationships that change as partners' needs change as they pass through different life stage. The average human life is now too long for one relationship to always last a lifetime. People change from 20 to 90 years of age, and with it their needs change. Adult experiences change who we are, what we love, and who we find lovable.

A partner that enables us to perform the tasks of one developmental stage may fail us later on. The "right one" for a person at one stage may be all wrong as time goes by.

Developmental stages and related primary tasks:

Prolonged adolescence -- young adulthood: building one's career

Parenting Years: nurturing children

Empty Nest Years: rediscovering one's own needs and delights

Old Age: coping with one's own and partner's infirmities & losses

In our society we may eventually openly accept that there will be a succession of love relationships in our lives, some where we chose to leave others, some where others chose to leave us. The pressure to find in young adulthood the ideal match for a lifetime will be removed. Personality changes will be better accommodated by the model of serial monogamy, with its recognition that adult experiences truly change who we are, what

we love, and therefore who we find most lovable.

Our society currently offers unprecedented opportunities for creating better relationships and stronger families. The freedom we have to shape our own relationships is greater than ever. Whether we can find conscientious ways to use this freedom remains to be seen.

Assorted Divorce-related Facts

Those who live together typically marry later, and those who marry later are statistically less likely to divorce.

Evidence shows that maintaining a conflict-ridden marriage is not in the children's best interests and that often children benefit from the dissolution of such marriages.

Wives formally initiate divorce more often (do the actual filing)

Involved fathers make it more difficult for mothers to initiate divorce: Fears about contested custody, disrupting children's relationship with an involved father, and spouse's loss of the relationship with his children

Women are usually more devastated initially by divorce, especially if they weren't working outside the home. Losing their home is more upsetting to women, because most women experience their homes as psychological extensions of themselves. Anxiety about custody panics many women, and often contributes to their willingness to settle for less than is due them financially.

Most men who initiate divorce are already in outside relationships. Men do best following divorce (psychologically and physically) if they establish a relationship with a woman. Older men who do not remarry often live rather isolated lives.

The current political agenda (family values) fuels guilt about divorce. Negative views of divorce create a self fulfilling prophecy: children are harmed by the insistence that they are being harmed, because they become stereotyped and convinced of their victimization.

Fathers of sons are less likely to leave: likelihood of divorce is reduced with each additional son. Lesson: involved fathers who feel important to their children's lives are less likely to act on their desires to leave or may find marriage more satisfying...or mothers of sons feel their children need their dads around, and consequently tolerate bad marriages more.

Better educated individuals who marry later are less likely to divorce: greater experience and maturity may help people make more informed choices.

Living together prior to marriage is no protection against divorce, in fact those who live together first, probably in part because they endorse more liberal values, are more likely to later divorce.

Birth control moved us from having to choosing children. Chosen children are probably harder for fathers to abandon.

It is estimated that it costs roughly a quarter of a million dollars to raise a child to age 18 today. Add another $100-200,000 for college and then toss in some graduate school funding.

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